

Spectacular Succulents, Terrific Terrestrials

All Thriving at the Cal Poly Plant Conservatory

BY STACIA MOMBURG



Matt Ritter inspects plants at the Cal Poly Plant Conservatory. (Photos by Chris Leschinsky)

Imagine a plant that retracts and appears dead the instant it's touched. Or a plant that survives on nothing but air, or one that makes a blanket to keep itself warm on a cold desert night.

Little Shop of Horrors? Not at all. These plants do exist and indeed are thriving at the Cal Poly Plant Conservatory.

Visitors to the conservatory will find a diverse mix of terrestrial, aquatic,

Professor Matt Ritter, the plant conservatory has a mission to maintain a diverse, well-documented and accurately labeled living-plant collection that enhances teaching and research for the faculty and students of Cal Poly.

The conservatory also works to foster education about plant biology and conservation of rare species through support of community outreach programs.

"The work and learning that take place in the conservatory is almost entirely hands-on, and the students seem to really enjoy it," he said.

The conservatory is supported primarily by the college-based fee initiative, voted in by College of Science and Mathematics students to support various programs that would not otherwise be funded. A portion of those fees helps pay

for students to perform horticultural maintenance, database management, Web site development and educational outreach work, as well as for equipment, supplies and

SEVERAL HUNDREDS OF SPECIES OF PLANTS FROM EVERY CORNER OF THE WORLD INHABIT THE WONDERFULLY RICH LIVING MUSEUM

succulent and epiphytic (air) plants, the likes of which are usually found only in Dr. Suess books.

Several hundreds of species of plants from every corner of the world inhabit the wonderfully rich living museum that lies in the center of the Cal Poly campus, including everything from average house plants to rare and endangered species.

Established in 2002 by Biology

Ritter, the conservatory's director, teaches students and others about the importance of plants in the environment and their role in human survival.

Students get to interact with all the live specimens of plants by growing, pollinating and propagating many rare species, Ritter explains. They also collect plants from local sites and replant native species during restoration projects.

new plants.

"We wouldn't be able to do this work without the support of our students. Their willingness to contribute to their learning environment speaks volumes about their dedication to learning," Ritter says.

The conservatory is open to the public and special tours can be arranged. Visit <http://www.plantconservatory.calpoly.edu> for hours and more information. ■